ROYAL STATISTICAL SOCIETY

DATA | EVIDENCE | DECISIONS

12 Errol Street
London EC1Y 8LX

020 7638 8998
rss@rss.org.uk
www.rss.org.uk

By email

3 June 2024

Dear First Minister,

We are writing to draw your attention to the Royal Statistical Society's manifesto for the general election, *Statistics in Action: a manifesto for empowering society through statistics*.

One of the key roles of the RSS, established in our Royal Charter, is to advocate for the role of statistics and data in decision-making. We believe that there is a crucial role for statistics and data both to improve decisions and inform the public – the importance of this was highlighted during the pandemic. A well-functioning statistical system means investment in infrastructure, transparency around the data used to inform decisions and decision-makers who are well-equipped to interpret statistical evidence.

As you may be aware, Professor Denise Lievesley has recently conducted a review of the UK Statistics Authority. The RSS has welcomed the findings of her review. The challenges highlighted by the review around data sharing between government departments and pre-release access to statistics are especially important for the next UK government to address. There are a number of systemic and cultural barriers to data sharing between government departments that hamper the government's ability to develop a full picture of the state of the nation and to drive improvements in the efficiency of public services. If the potential for data to help improve services is to be fulfilled, governments must ensure that their data infrastructure is fit for purpose.

It is also important to stop the practice of pre-release access to statistics. The RSS has long argued that pre-release access to statistics has a harmful impact on our political system and that abandoning the practice could improve public confidence in official statistics. The idea that governments need to see statistics early to prepare their response to them is harmful for two reasons. First, it means that when the public see a department's statistical release it comes with a pre-prepared press line – the public are sensitive to this spinning of information, and it risks breeding mistrust in the statistics themselves. Second, it helps to perpetuate the impression that ministers control data and its release. There is an opportunity for Scotland to set a good example to the other nations of the UK on this matter and we would urge you to consider taking it.

Supporting the statistical system by addressing these points from the Lievesley Review is important – but it is also vital that the ministers who are receiving advice based on statistics and data are well-positioned to interpret and use that evidence. This means both having an understanding of how to interpret data-based evidence (and what questions to ask of it) as well as how to handle the data in an ethical manner – in line with the Code of Practice for Statistics.

There are important steps that you can take as First Minister to help entrench this approach within the Scottish government and lead the way within the UK. We would urge you to:

1. Direct government departments to improve data sharing and report regularly on their progress and set out plans to support Scotland's data infrastructure.
2. End the practice of pre-release access to statistics within the Scottish government – demonstrating trustworthiness to increase public confidence in how data informs decisions.

ROYAL
STATISTICAL
SOCIETY

DATA | EVIDENCE | DECISIONS

12 Errol Street
London EC1Y 8LX

020 7638 8998
rss@rss.org.uk
www.rss.org.uk

3. Ensure that all ministers that you appoint receive training in interpreting statistical and data-based evidence (which the RSS would be happy to provide as part of our charitable function).
4. Update the Scottish Ministerial Code to require ministers to abide by the Code of Practice for Statistics.
5. Ask your MPs to advocate for our approach in the House of Commons.

Please let us know if it would be helpful to have any more information on any of these points.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Sarah Cumbers
Chief Executive Officer

Dr. Andrew Garrett
President